

Lessons learned

Widow's story on Gulf War haunts, instructs

Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there occurred a war, Desert Storm.

This January marked the five-year anniversary of the commencement of the Persian Gulf War. I remember sitting in Mr. Luther's civics class in 1991, watching CNN news clips showing stories of the war.

The reasons for the conflict weren't apparent to me at the time. And now the causes and consequences of war stay in a file in my mind marked: "Stuff I know I don't understand."

The causes of the Gulf War remain unclear. There is no tidy explanation, at least none that this bystander can identify.

Sure, I know some details: a tyrant, oil, territorial disputes, human rights abuses.

But the consequences are apparent: death, destruction of national infrastructures, damage to the environment, the genocide and displacement of the Kurds, and a new awareness of international order.

I imagine the impetus for war was fear.

My intention is to understand that which promotes fear. Years after the flight of the white flag, Saddam Hussein is still in power. I hope he was not the catalyst of fear because his position remains unchanged.

And it is said, "The fear will bring into existence that which is feared."

We share stories to gain a level of understanding about an incident that life experience has not yet provided us.

As I have never visited the Middle East, the demographics of the conflict are unclear. The war and its consequences seem far away to this 23-year-old.

Enter Carol Bentzlin.

On a tip from a colleague, I dug up the story of this newlywed whose husband was one of the first American casualties of the war.



Kelly Johnson

"The conditions of war perpetrated a strange twist of fate in this woman's life. She lost her husband to circumstances beyond her control. But she also lost faith in her government."

Steve Bentzlin, who was 23 when he died, was killed when an American missile launched by a U.S. Air Force A-10 bomber hit the light-armor vehicle he was riding in near the village of Khafji.

The tale of the incident and its aftermath is extraordinary.

Nearly seven months passed before the U.S. government disclosed that Bentzlin was killed by "friendly fire." His bride thinks a faulty missile caused the death and that the government has not disclosed information that will put the case to rest.

The Marine Corps was snail-like in returning Marine Cpl. Bentzlin's personal belongings to his family and paying death benefits.

In the aftermath, a faulty missile launching component built into the bomber by Hughes Aircraft was speculated to have caused a misdirection in the flight of the

missile. A lawsuit followed.

Under the contractor defense — a company working in good faith to government specifications is immune from negligence suits — Hughes was granted immunity on the grounds that a lawsuit would reveal national secrets.

So Carol Bentzlin's questions remain unanswered. And her struggles persist.

The more I read about the past five years of this stranger's life, the more compelled I became to share her story.

The conditions of war perpetrated a strange twist of fate in this woman's life. She lost her husband to circumstances beyond her control. But she also lost faith in her government.

We can't be in all places at all times, but we can take part in each other's life experiences by listening to each other's stories.

We can act compassionately by paying attention. By giving consideration to each other's struggles. By grappling with each other's questions.

As stories unfold, the images we hold of events beyond us necessarily change. New information and ideas must lead to clarity of vision. By seeing war at a personal level, we receive glimpses of a larger picture.

Listen to the stories surrounding you.

Others have been there, and we may never know the circumstances of warring times and nations if we don't respect the worth of their experiences.

Certainly the character of generations past was influenced by war. The factions war creates, the fear it propagates, the vision it destroys, the energy it spends.

Listen to the stories.

By seeing what is past and how that lives in whomever is present, we can gain understanding.

Listen.

Johnson is a senior news-editorial and English major and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

Letters from Dublin



Little crime found on Ireland's streets

Walking down the streets of Dublin, you'll see plenty of Coke ads, McDonald's and even a Subway or two. But there's one American icon you won't see — guns.

In Ireland and the United Kingdom, guns are outlawed. The police (or Garda in Irish) don't even carry guns. They were banned in Ireland in 1922 after the civil war and the war of independence.

The idea was to "take the guns out of Irish politics." Following the wars, a lot of guns remained in anti-government hands, and the government thought the best way to prevent further violence was to take away a most powerful arguing tool. (Shotguns and some rifles are allowed for hunting purposes and must be licensed.)

From an American point of view, this seems archaic at first. The right to bear arms was a provision of the founding document of our country.

Look at both of the countries today. In many American cities, murder by firearm is a way of life. In Dublin, it's still front-page news.

In all of the U.K. in 1993, 80 crimes of rape, robbery and homicide were committed. In Ireland, less than 20 were killed last year. In the United States, the numbers are much higher.

Statistics are statistics and are difficult to compare because of the obvious differences in population and geography — the countries in the U.K. and Ireland are mainly island countries with borders that are easier to patrol.

Still, the fact that guns play a very small part in crime in Ireland and that the garda have no need for them is almost impossible for me to believe.

The last murder of a police officer in Ireland occurred in 1982. The punishment for murdering a police officer is death by hanging. The offender wasn't hanged, because his sentence was commuted, but he is serving a life sentence — a 400-year life sentence.

It seems from the people I've talked to, that they feel secure in not having guns be a bargaining tool in everyday life; however, times are changing.

Just today, a man went to trial in Dublin as a suspect in a killing of a woman and her son. The woman was shot in the left eye socket, the boy was shot in the head. The killing happened in western Ireland.

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The issue of guns was brought up during a British news show not too long ago. The discussion ranged from whether to arm the police force to allowing people to use guns for personal protection.

It seemed that most people weren't ready to take a step toward firearms, but were willing to consider more deterrent weapons such as pepper sprays.

Currently, police officers carry only truncheons. Citizens are allowed knives with blades less than six inches in length.

Personally, I'm not making a claim for or against gun control, but I am curious as to what path the U.K. and Ireland will take in coming years. And I wonder if American politics will be swayed by the statistics in these two governments.

For right now, I am awed that a city with one million people can be patrolled by officers without firearms. It's almost a modern wonder to me to think that people here have enough faith in their fellow man to not want to carry a firearm.

It's almost sad to see this, and then to look back on my own country and see what a way of life we have with guns. Then again, whether it could have been changed by omitting the second amendment is not something of which I am sure either.

But if and when things do change on either side of the Atlantic, I'm sure it will be the next shot heard 'round the world.

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Save the children

Increasing abuse has more than physical effect

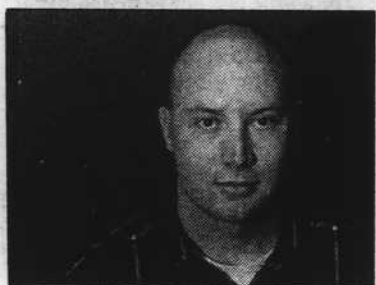
I came across a story in the newspaper last semester that disturbed me. Perhaps you'll remember it. The story centered on the murder of Elisa Izquierdo by her mother. It has since haunted me.

Her tale follows as such: Elisa was born to a wonderful father and worthless mother. Gustavo, her father, managed on his meager income to enroll her in a private school. When times became tough, she was lucky enough to have her tuition paid for by the school's patron, the Prince of Greece. He eventually promised to pay for her schooling until 12th grade, after falling under the precocious little girl's spell. Everyone in the school recognized Elisa as a buoyant, happy child.

Unfortunately, Elisa's mother, Awilda Lopez, sued for and won visitation rights. She immediately began abusing her daughter.

Compounding the problem was Gustavo's sudden death from cancer, before his petition to the courts to deny Lopez visitation was decided upon. After his death, the courts gave custody, under protest from many, to Lopez, even though evidence of abuse was presented in the case.

Lopez was unfit to be a mother. A chronic drug user, she was given chance after chance to get clean, only to constantly relapse. She openly told people she beat Elisa because Gustavo had put a curse on the child. The teachers at the Montessori school that Elisa attended noticed her change and again reported abuse. Lopez's response was to remove her from the school, placing her in a public one. Elisa became withdrawn, the abuse taking its toll. The final night of her life was filled with rape, beating and torture.



Jody Burke

"You don't have to look to Watts to see the anti-social behavior, or a cycle of abuse. It is an unsettling trend that bucks social and political lines."

Neighbors noted to police they heard the beatings all night long.

As I mentioned before, I came across the story awhile ago, and it still is vivid in my mind. I began to do research into the subject of child abuse. It seemed to me that this kind of abuse by a parent had to be isolated. I could not and did not want to believe that parents would do these things to their own children.

The more I read, unfortunately, the more I found I was wrong. There were cases where fathers glued their daughters' eyes shut, children were chained in basements and forced to eat dog food, or worse. Children were being scalded or having their genitals burned because they wet the bed. What's more, the viciousness and sheer number of these crimes are increasing.

The thing that eats me inside is I

don't have any answers, but I cannot deny the problem. I doubt any of us have the answers. When I think about it, my stomach twists into a knot. The problem is so big that the solution needs to be more than just throwing dollars into an unresponsive welfare system. It has to do with strengthening families, finding people who care enough to help and stopping the cycle of abuse that is being created. It has to do with the system not placing the highest priority on keeping the family intact, especially when doing so is at the expense of the child's safety.

I'm nowhere near having children. I can barely get myself out of bed. I have to believe, however, that the situation demands concern from us all. These children, raised around drugs, around rape and so on, are everyone's children. The problems they have because of their abuse will manifest themselves in various ways. Regardless of how they do, we as a society will have to deal with them. In reality, we already are. You don't have to look to Watts to see the anti-social behavior, or a cycle of abuse. It is an unsettling trend that bucks social and political lines.

I don't see why some parents deserve second, third and fourth or more, sometimes many more, chances. It takes so little to radically alter, for the worse, a child's life. It is time for the country — for all of us — to stop being so afraid of offending, and begin to do what's right. An extra dose of vigilance does not mean running out and spying on your neighbors to check for abuse. It means, if ever faced with the situation, doing what is right, and saving the children.

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